

LORD GEORGE, THE sixteenth earl of Brighton, had amassed one of the finest private collections of Renaissance art in Great Britain. A notorious recluse, the earl rarely ventured off his estate and hardly ever allowed outside eyes to view his priceless works. Like many collectors, he was obsessed with increasing his holdings. When it was announced that the Augustinian Fathers were considering selling their Verrocchio bust of St. Augustine, the earl jumped at the chance, claiming that he was prepared to offer more than any museum to acquire the statue, one of the few by Leonardo da Vinci's famous teacher to survive the centuries.

Late one afternoon, a black van drove through the gates of Brighton Manor, bringing the bronze St. Augustine for a formal appraisal and perhaps an informal offer. The earl of Brighton met his overnight guests at the door. Father Damien, a grim-visaged man, introduced himself. "Lord George, I must warn you. I am opposed to this transaction. The bust was a gift to our order centuries ago from the artist himself. To sell it would be a grave sacrilege."

The earl stood tall and unmoved. "That's your opinion. Don't tell me you drove the statue all the way here in that van? What about security?"

"The Lord is our security," Damien replied. "And Father Vito." He pointed to his companion, a priest about the same imposing size as himself but with a fierce scar running across one cheek.

The two friars carried a wooden crate through the hall and into the library and carefully unveiled the life-size bust. "Stunning," a voice whispered from the shadows. "Oh. Sorry to startle." A plump man waddled forward. "I'm Warren Tuffet, auction-house appraiser. Lord George brought me in to authenticate and advise. It's the Verrocchio, all right," he added after a minute's worth of inspection.

The foursome left the statue in the protection of an aging guard while the host led his guests on a tour. "The house has a Catholic background, you'll be pleased to hear. The second

earl of Brighton was a devout Roman Catholic. During the reign of Henry VIII, he took in several priests, hiding them from the king's wrath. I assume you want to see my collection," he added reluctantly and showed them into the exhibition rooms.

When the museum tour was over, the host and his guests retired to refresh themselves and dress for dinner. It was during this break, while all were alone in different parts of the manor, that the crime took place.

At 7:17 P.M., the butler walked by the library and discovered the guard stumbling groggily about. The Verrocchio was missing from its wooden stand. Immediately, the servant sounded the alarm. Within minutes, the entire household had assembled. "Got hit," the guard mumbled, massaging a welt on the back of his head. "Knocked me down but not out. I saw . . ." "Saw what?" Warren Tuffet demanded. "Who took the statue?"

The old guard, Edgar Chipping, didn't answer. He was too busy clutching his arm, then his chest, and then collapsing to the parquet floor under the impact of a massive heart attack. "Priest stole."

"Priest?" Lord George shouted. "Which priest? Both of them?"

"No." The guard shook his head in frustration, his face growing beet-red. "Priest stole." He pointed toward Father Damien standing by the spot where the statue had rested.

"Here. Understand."

Those were to be the last words Edgar Chipping uttered. Within seconds he was dead, leaving Father Damien to face one count of grand larceny and one count of felony murder. The statue was never found and two months later the Augustinian was brought to trial, accused by the last words of a dying man.